BIRDS AND BIODIVERSITY IN BROCKWELL PARK –

Past, Present and Future

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The Author

Czech Conroy is a keen amateur wildlife photographer and naturalist. He has been living in Herne Hill for several decades and is a frequent visitor to Brockwell Park. This booklet is based on a talk he gave to the Annual General Meeting of the Friends of Brockwell Park, 16 October 2022.

Friends of Brockwell Park

FOBP is a charity made up of members, our committee and other volunteers who want to preserve and protect the park for the whole community.

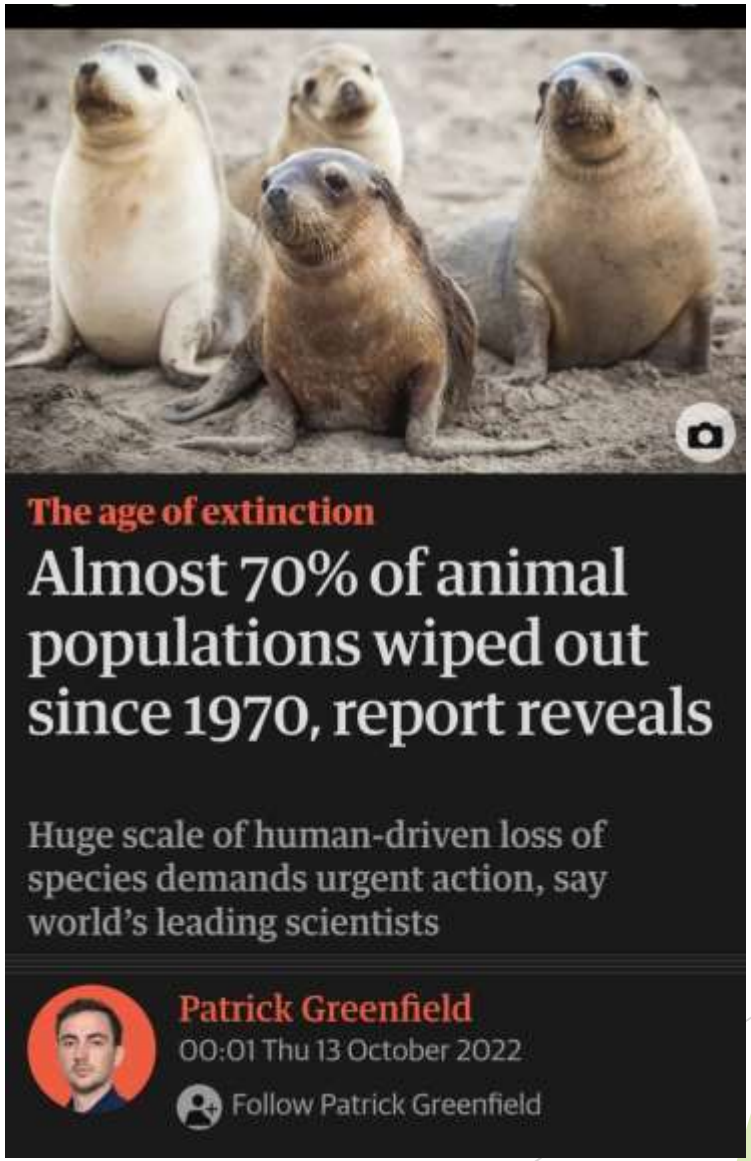
We care about protecting the park as an historic, landscaped, beautiful open space, a place of ecological and cultural interest.

Website
https://www.friendsofbrockwellpark.org/

The Age of Extinction

We live in what is sometimes called ‘The Age of Extinction’, because large numbers of species are becoming extinct - primarily due to the impacts (e.g. pollution, climate change, deforestation, hunting) of our species on the planet. In addition, most of the species that haven’t become extinct have seen their populations reduced significantly.

These trends have been experienced at the global level, and at the national level in most countries. In the UK there has been a long term decline in bird numbers, for example - 27% since the early 1970s (Note 1). The trends also apply at the local level in many places, probably including Herne Hill and Brockwell Park.



PAST

Biodiversity in Herne Hill around 1980

I'm not aware of scientific data showing trends in wildlife species in this area that date back this far. So I'm going to rely on anecdotal information and my own observations for four species.

Kestrel When I moved to Herne Hill in 1981 my first home was in Kestrel Avenue, and I remember seeing a Kestrel fly over on the day I moved in. Then many years passed without me seeing one in Herne Hill – they were in effect extinct in this area. There have been a few sightings in recent months, but they are still a rare sight in Brockwell Park.

Hedgehog Walking home one night from the middle of Herne Hill I heard a rustling noise coming from a garden. I peered over the fence and saw a hedgehog moving around. That was the last one I saw in this area, and reports of them in Herne Hill seem to have died out in the 1980s.

House martin These attractive birds nested in Brockwell Park at one time, as well as under the eaves of houses in Trinity Rise. Their numbers gradually dwindled until they stopped breeding in Trinity Rise about six years ago.

Swift These birds usually nest in holes in buildings. They were quite abundant 40 years ago, but now I see only 3 or 4 flying over Brockwell Park during the breeding season.

PRESENT

PRESENT Birds in Brockwell Park – How are we doing now?

There is a lot more information available about the wildlife of Brockwell Park currently, particularly for birds, much of it based on recorded sightings by various birdwatchers and other nature enthusiasts. In 2022:

- 97 species had been recorded in or over the park as of the end of October. (This compares with:- Dulwich Park, 45; Clapham Common, 47; and Burgess Park, 63.)

- there were about 29 resident species (species that can be seen in the park in all months of the year, and that breed here or nearby), and

- there were 5 species of summer visitors (from Africa), which bred in or near the park

(Source: *ebird.org*)

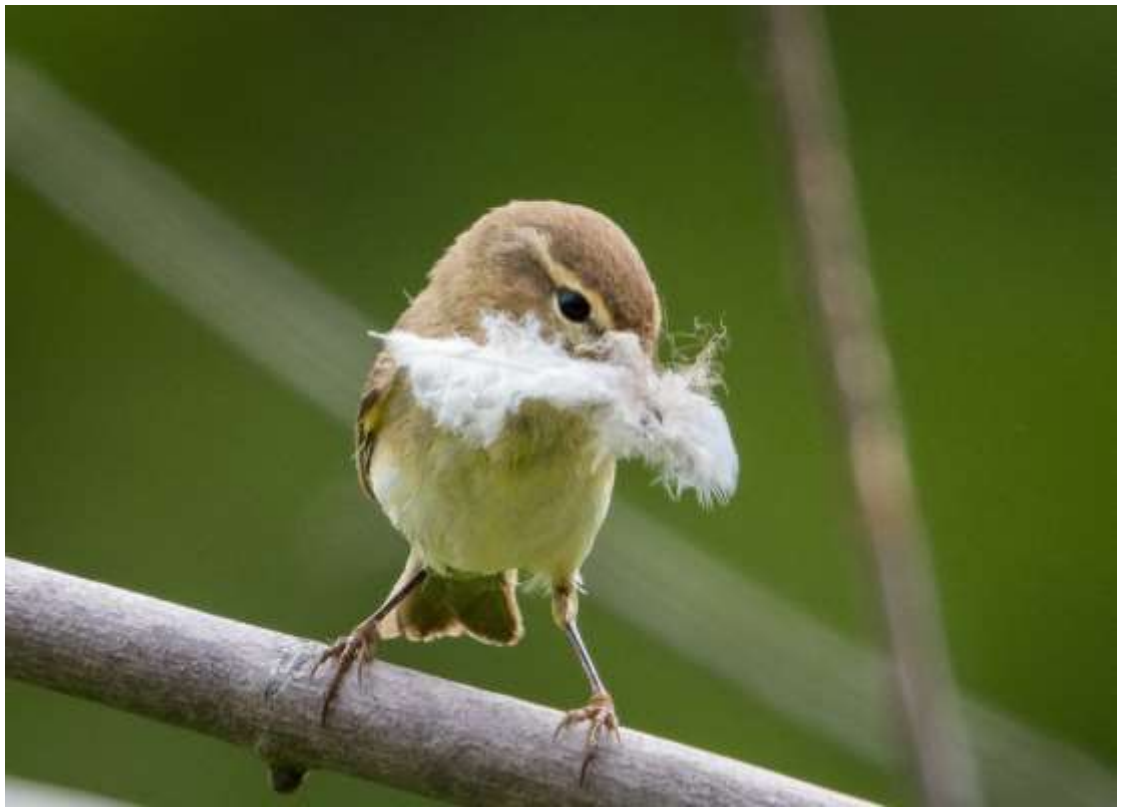
RESIDENT BIRDS OF BROCKWELL PARK

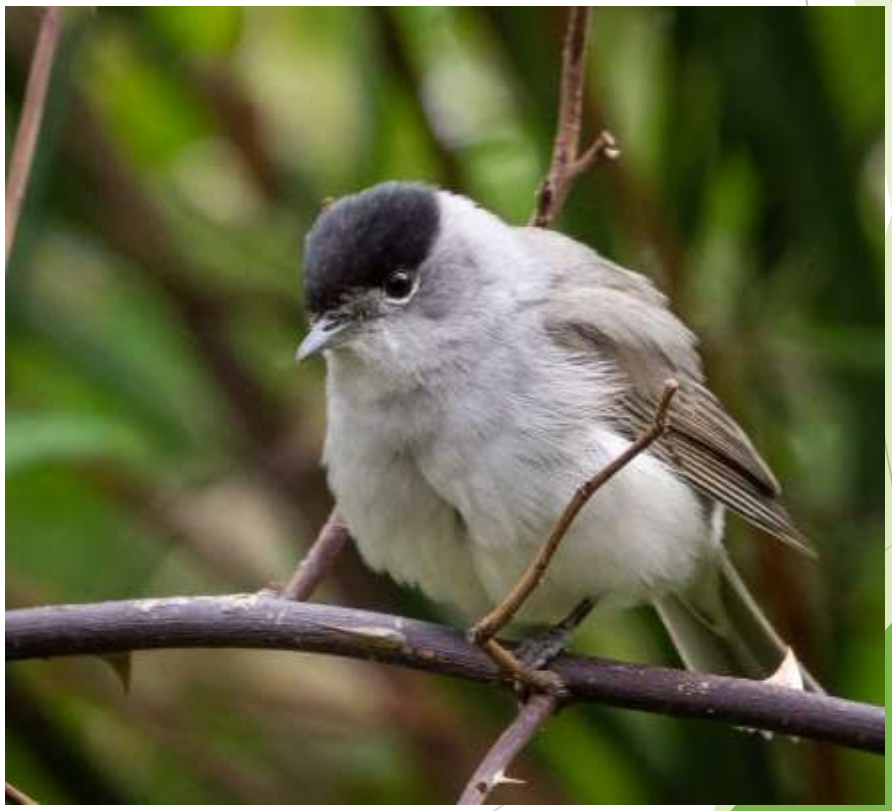
The birds listed below can be present in the park at any time of the year. They breed in or near the park.

- Blackbird
- Blue tit
- Carrion crow
- Chaffinch
- Coot
- Dunnock
- Feral pigeon
- Goldfinch
- Great spotted woodpecker
- Great tit
- Greenfinch
- House sparrow
- Jay
- Little owl
- Long-tailed tit
- Mistle thrush
- Magpie
- Mallard
- Moorhen
- Mute swan
- Nuthatch
- Pied wagtail
- Ring-necked parakeet
- Song thrush
- Starling
- Stock dove
- Tufted duck
- Wood pigeon
- Wren

Five Summer Visitors:

Blackcap (photo on right), Chiffchaff (photo on left), Reed warbler, Swift, Whitethroat





Borderline Birds – no room for complacency

Some of the resident birds and summer visitors are very few (less than ten) in number. The main constraint is limited suitable habitat and/or nesting sites. Further disturbance or loss of habitat/cover could mean that they cease to breed in the park.

- Chiffchaff (1 breeding pair that I know of)
- Mistle thrush
- Nuthatch (1 breeding pair?)
- Reed warbler (1 breeding pair – in the reeds by the top pond)
- Song thrush
- Swift (nesting in houses in Milton Road and Rattray Road)
- Whitethroat (1 breeding pair)

ASSESSMENT

Brockwell Park is doing well for a suburban park in inner London, thanks to the efforts of council staff and the good work of Friends of Brockwell Park, Brockwell Park Community Partners and others.

The park is designated by the council as a *Site of Importance for Nature Conservation*.

There is plenty of scope for further measures to support the park's wildlife and significantly increase its biodiversity and importance for nature conservation.

TO IDENTIFY WHAT CAN BE DONE FOR BIRDS WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THEIR BASIC NEEDS

1. Shelter

- Habitat (e.g. trees, bushes, long grass, reeds)
- Safe places to nest

2. Food

e.g. insects, seeds, fruits, worms

3. Peace (and Quiet)

- Absence of disturbance in their ‘comfort zone’ (by humans, dogs)

DISTURBANCE results in birds feeling threatened, and avoiding an area where they might otherwise feed (Note 2) or nest; and may also damage important habitats or plant species. It can be caused by:

(a) the presence of humans (even if they are walking quietly)
(b) the presence of dogs, scaring off birds (Note 3);
(c) dog faeces and urine, changing soil conditions and discouraging the growth of wildflowers (Note 4); or
(d) sustained abnormally loud noises (generated by e.g. traffic, machinery, or potentially major events) having negative impacts on birds and other animals (Note 5).

Higher levels of disturbance tend to lead to lower levels of biodiversity.

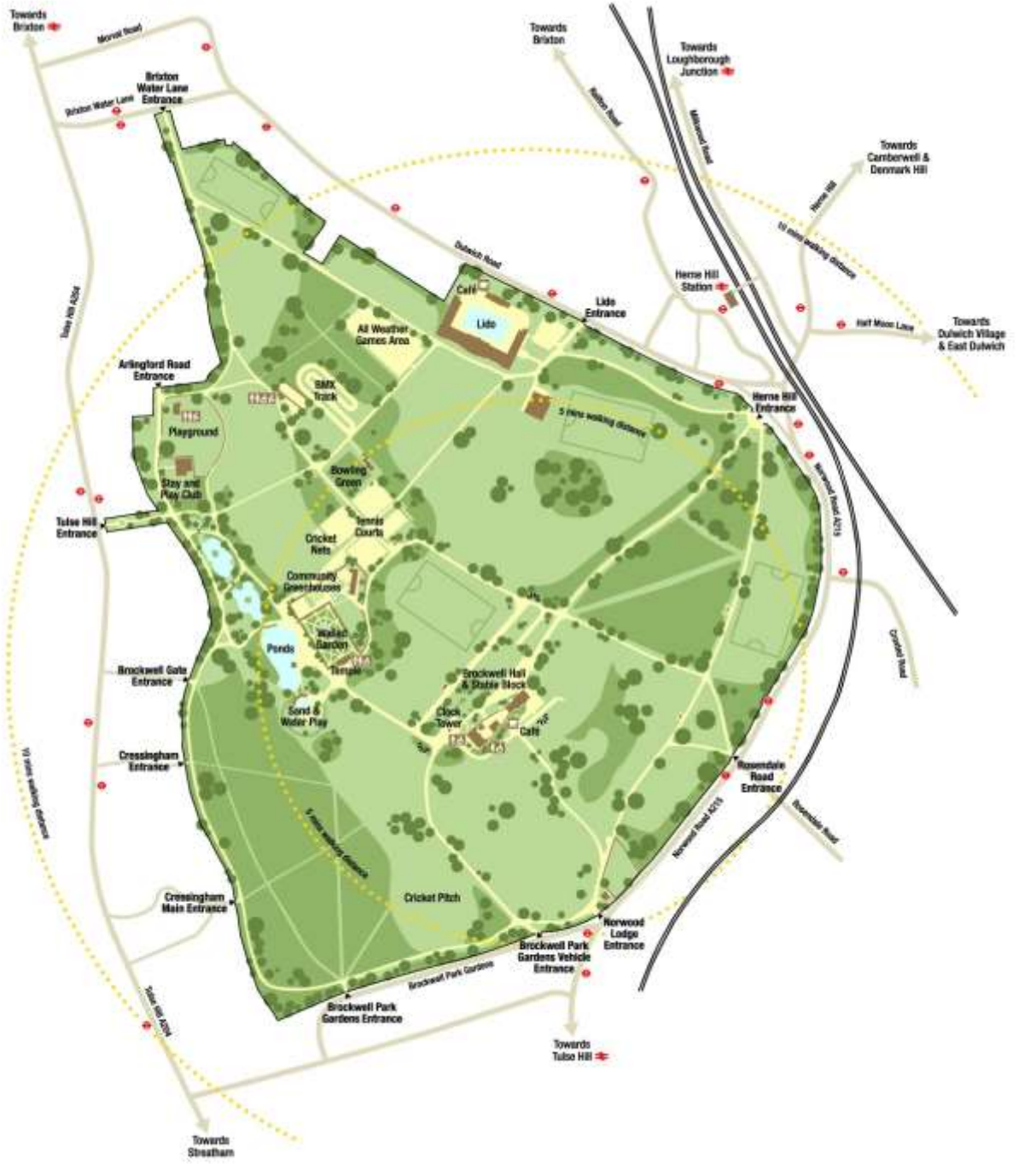
DISTURBANCE (Human & canine pressures)	Low	Medium	High
BIODIVERSITY	High	Medium	Low

FEATURES OF THE PARK

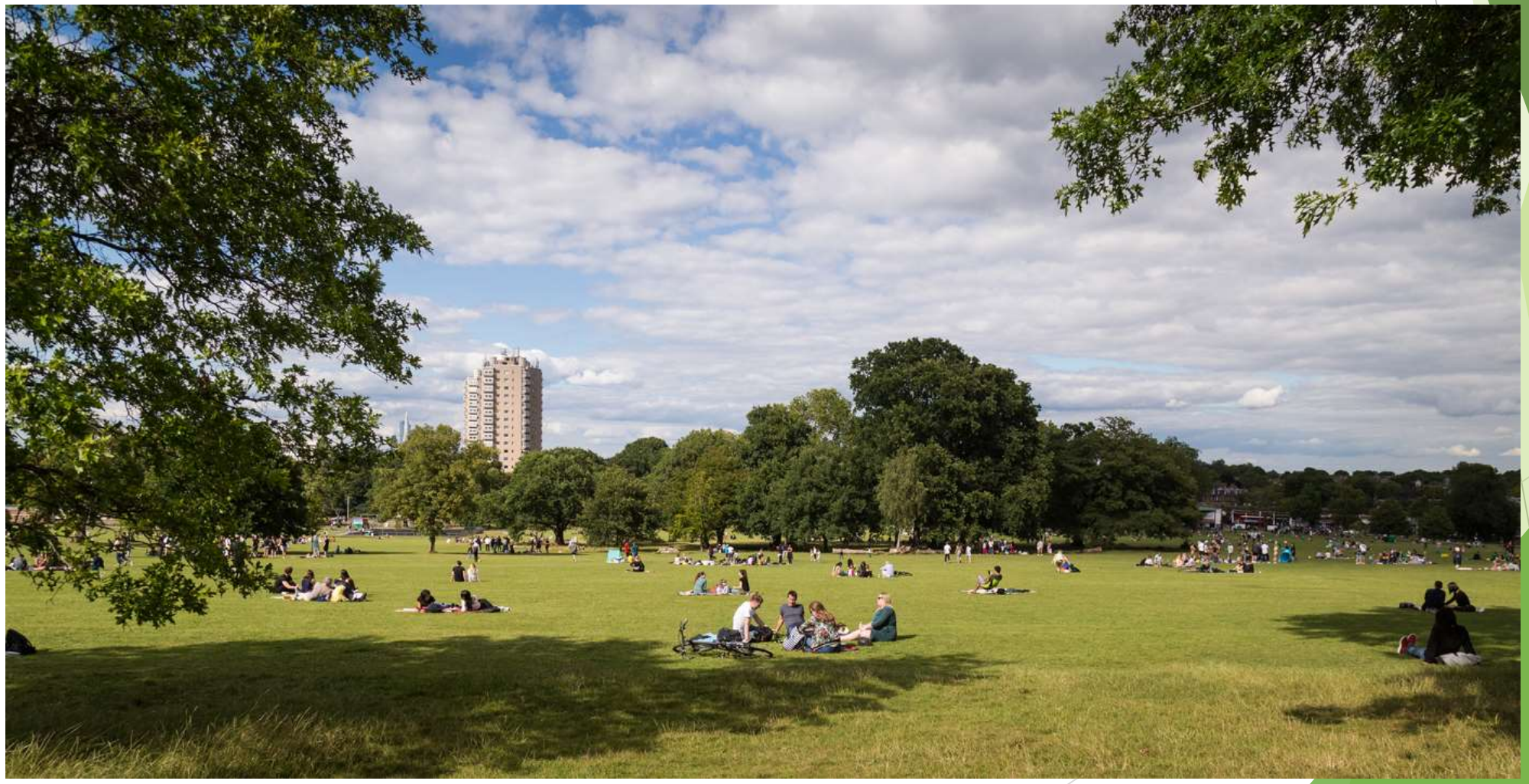
This map of the park shows its main features:

- Mature trees
- Ponds (and lido)
- Open spaces

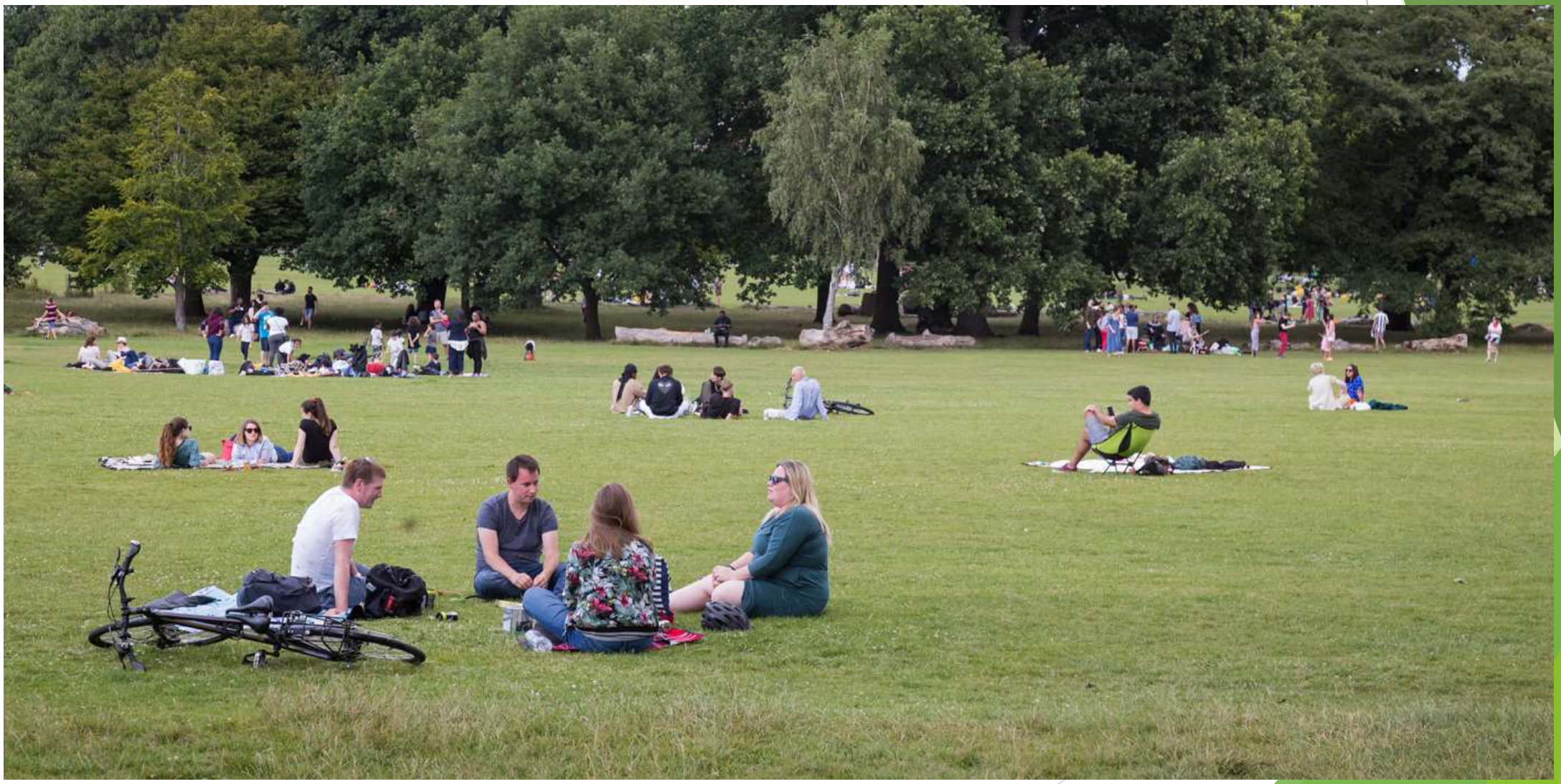
And it shows that most of the park takes the form of green open spaces



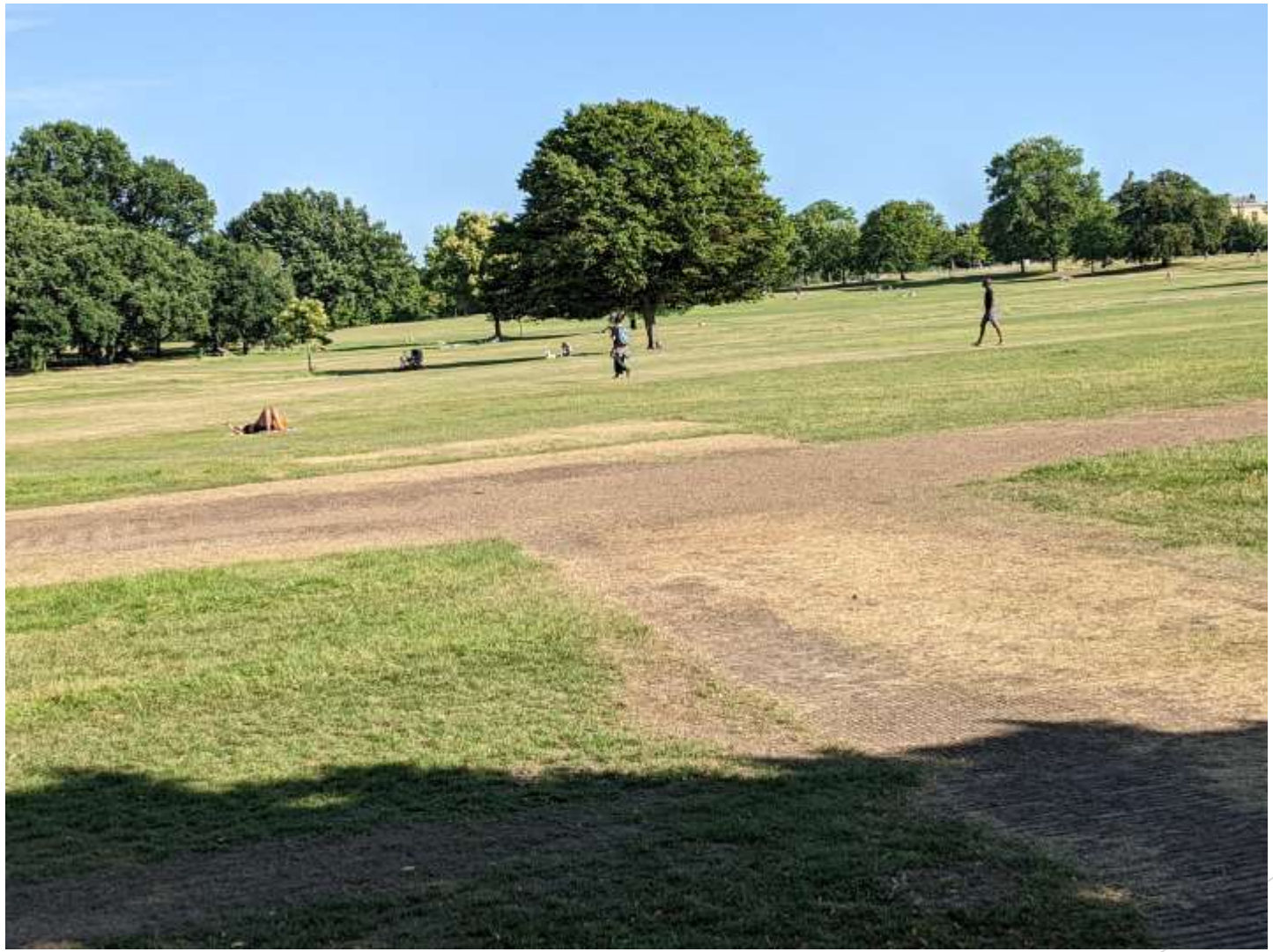
The Green Open Spaces are mainly High Disturbance/Low Biodiversity Areas – made up of very short grasses



…. where birds are generally absent



Even when there aren’t many people around, there are few birds to be seen

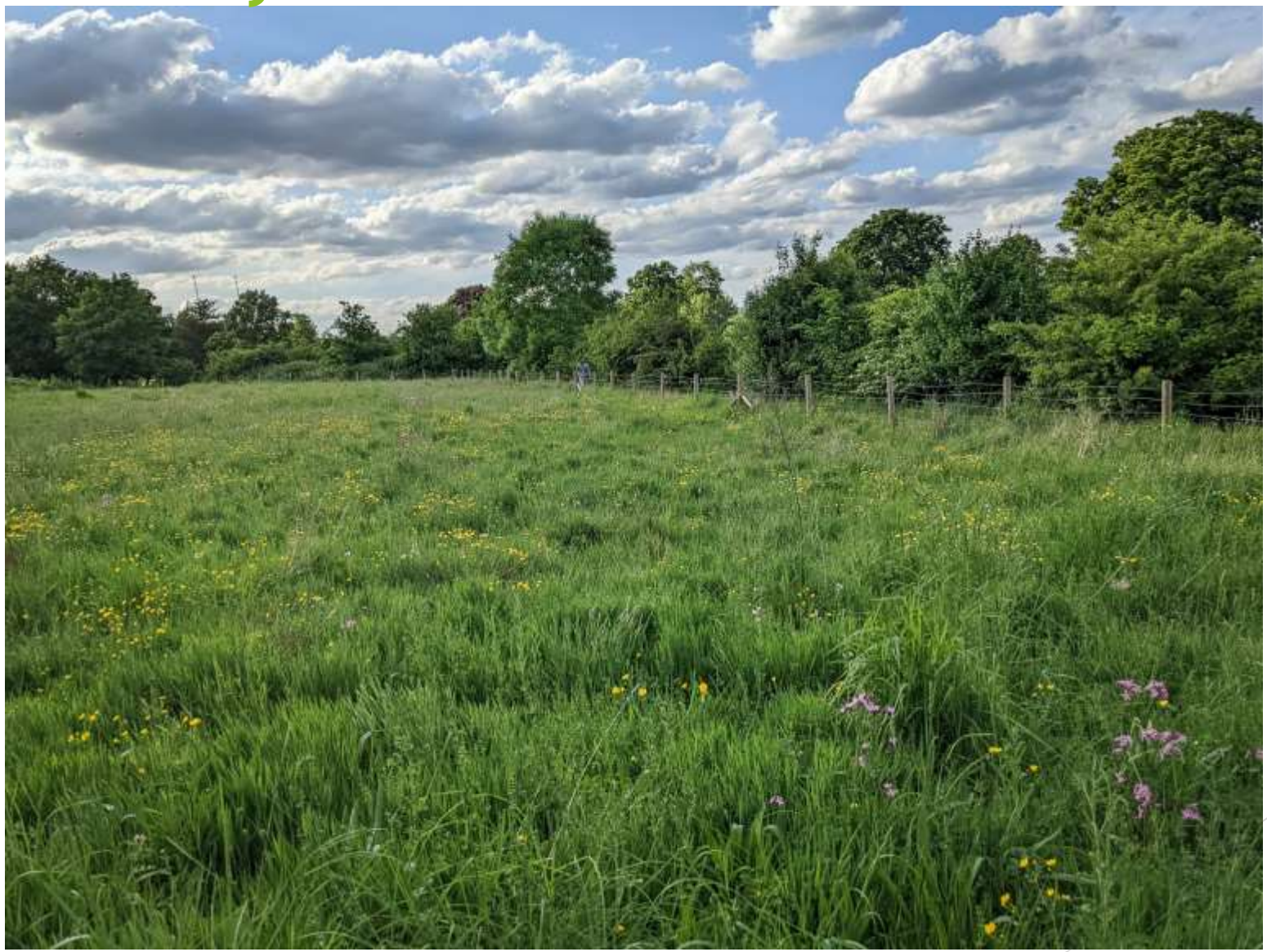


Increasing Bird (and other) Biodiversity requires the creation of a greater area of High Biodiversity Spaces - of which there are two types

1. Carefully managed spaces, usually fenced off (such as the existing wildflower meadow, wildflower bank, and areas around the ponds)

2. Low maintenance spaces, where there is minimal management - usually unfenced

A carefully managed ‘Low Disturbance/High Biodiversity Area’ – the wildflower meadow

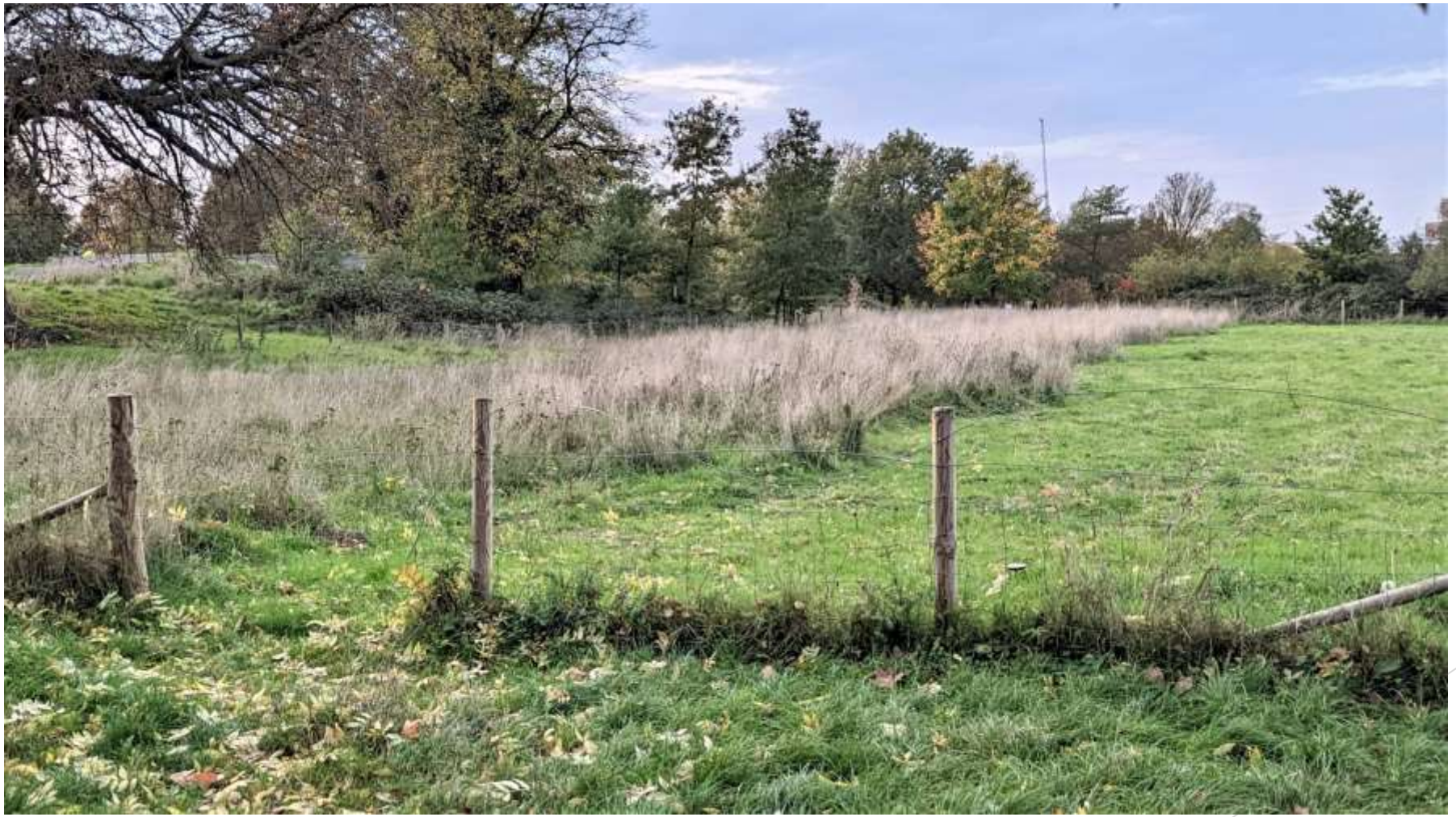


In the wildflower meadow a large variety of flowering plants is able to grow tall each year, providing food and shelter for insects and for birds.

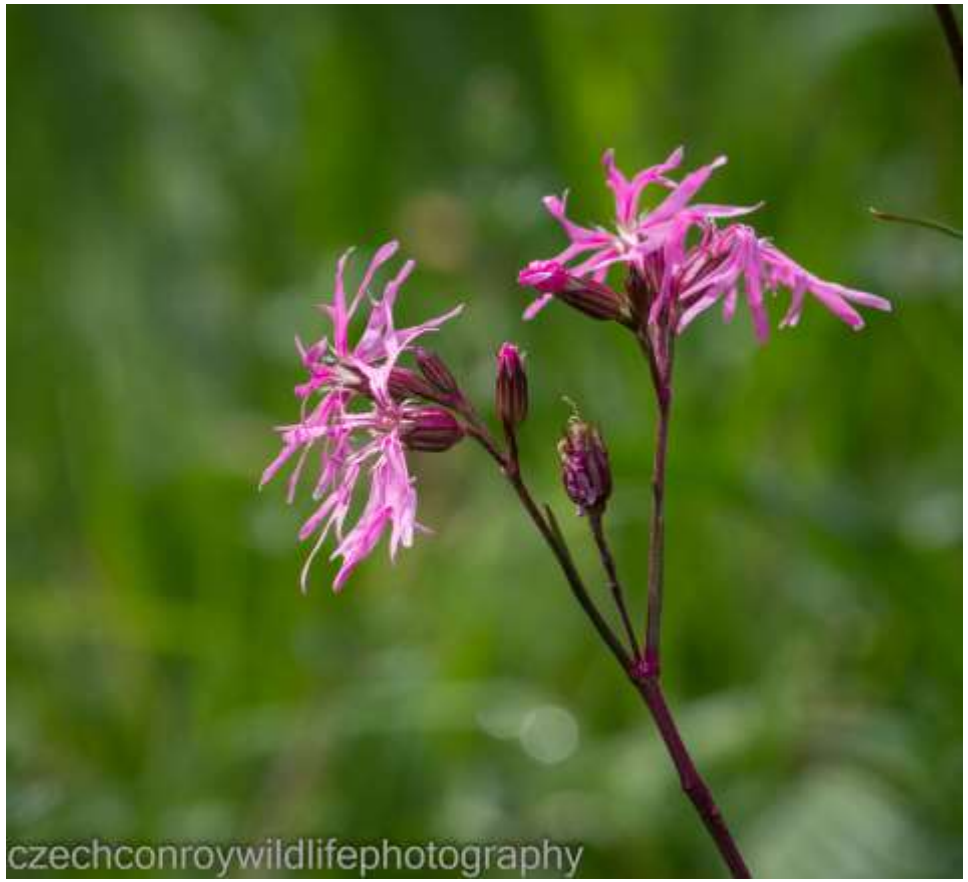
This has been achieved by (a) fencing off the area; and (b) reducing the soil fertility, which enables the flowering plants to out-compete grasses. The council reduces soil fertility by cutting the vegetation in half of the meadow each autumn and removing it from the meadow.

The following photos show the meadow when it has been cut, and some of the many plants that grow there.

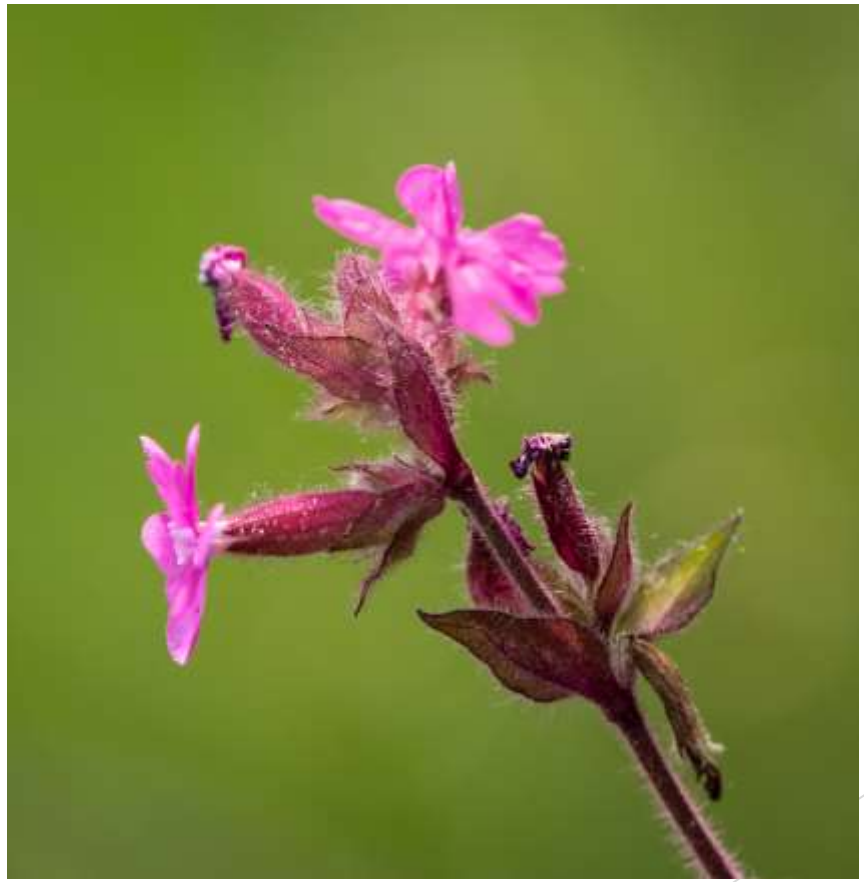
The Wildflower Meadow after one half has been cut in the Autumn



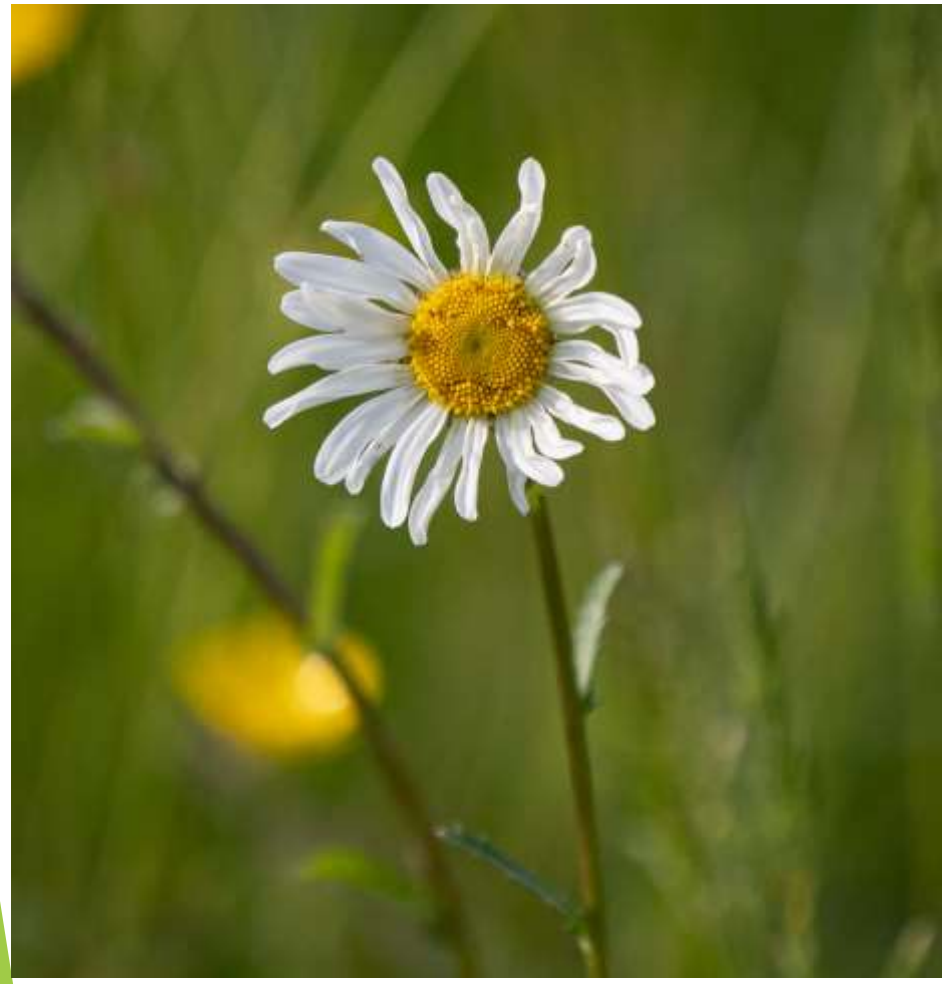
Ragged robin



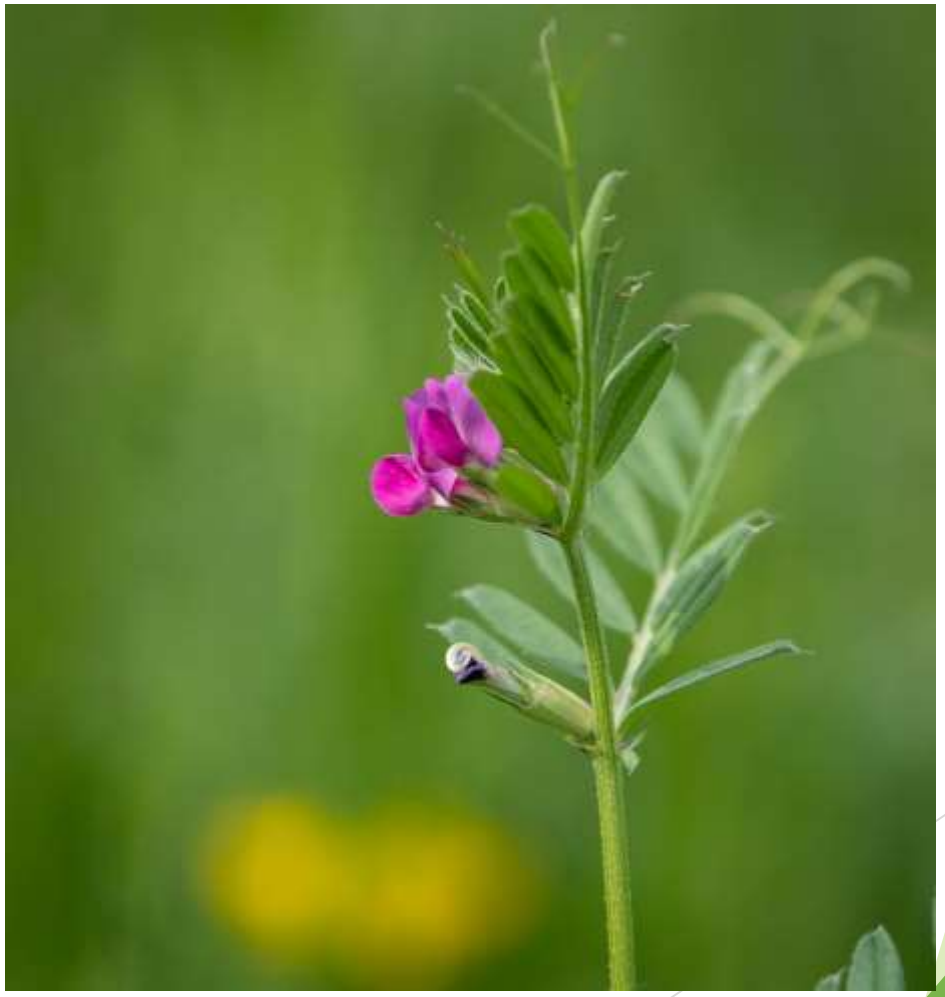
Red campion



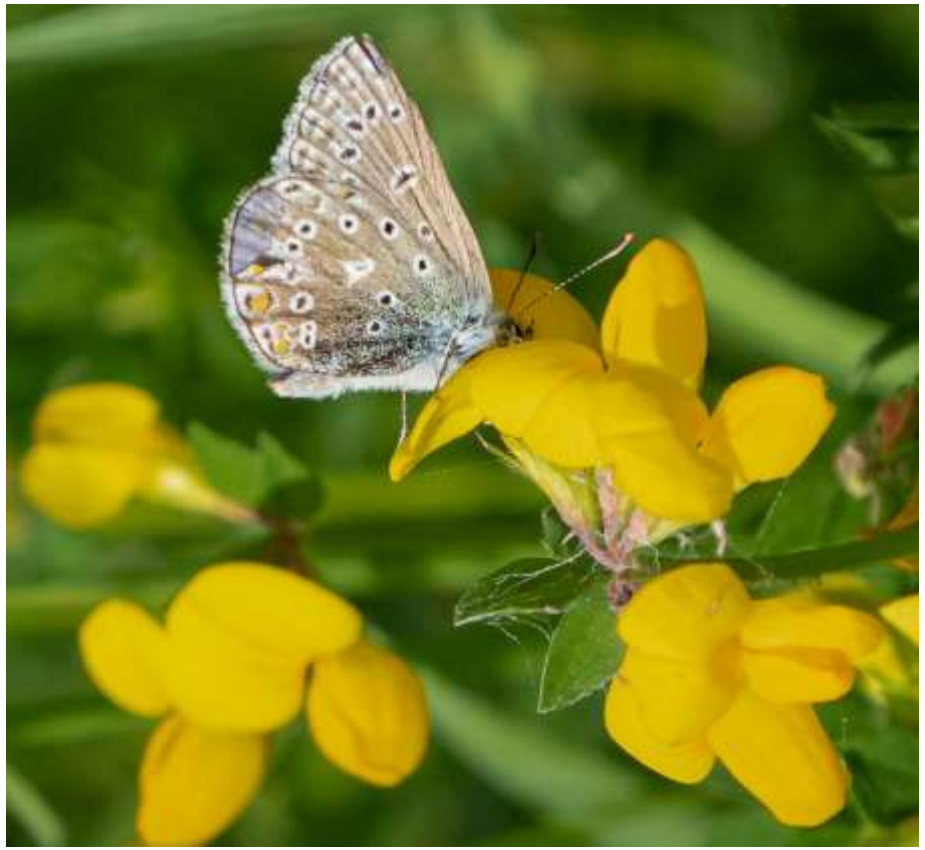
Oxeye daisy



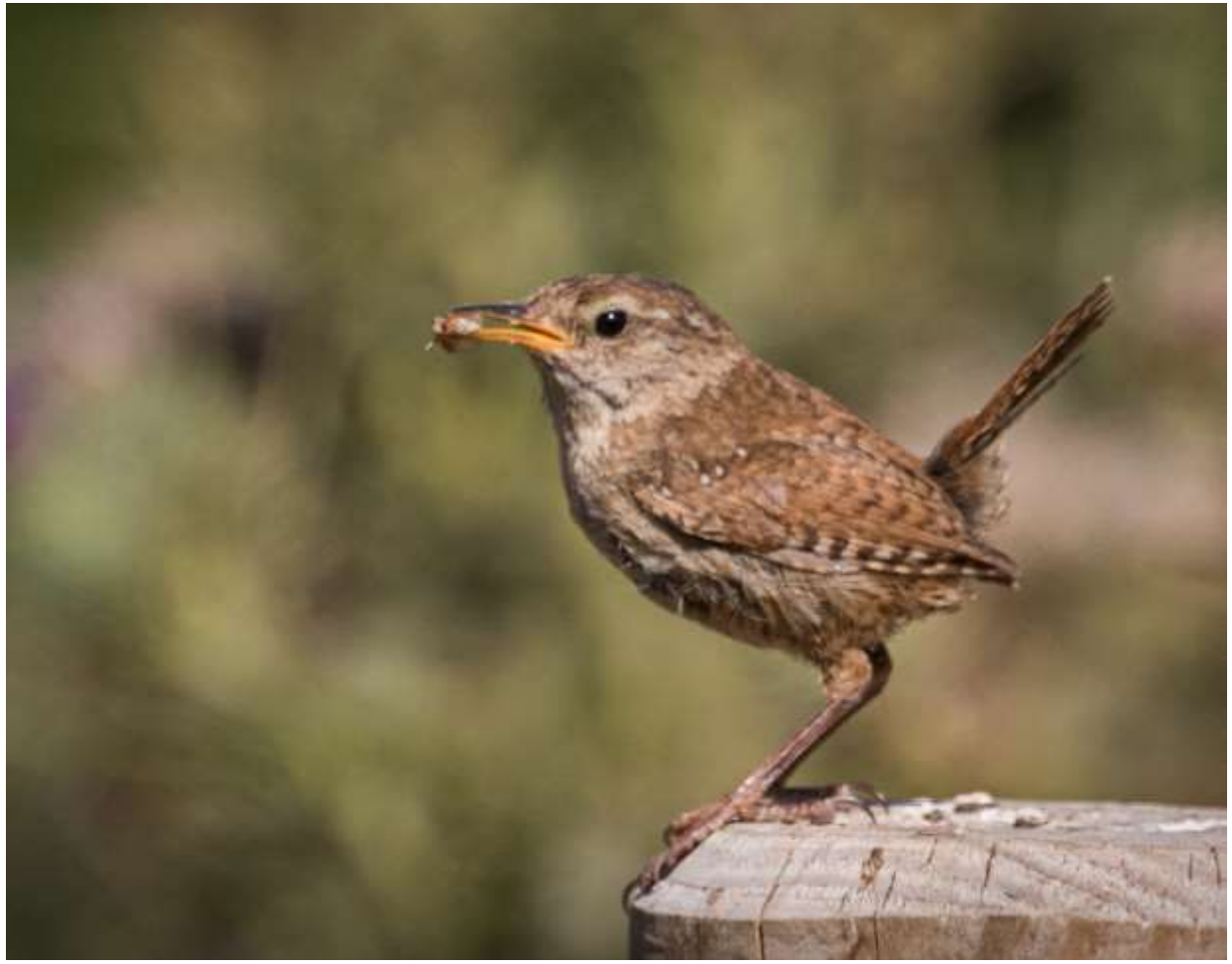
Common vetch



Bird’s foot trefoil – providing food for the Common blue butterfly and Red-tailed bumblebee



The meadow's caterpillars, flying insects etc. attract birds like this wren. It has just flown up from the meadow onto one of the fence posts, and is about to take some food to the chicks in its nest nearby



Several birds nest low down (< 3 metres from the ground), or in bushes and shrubs, and need areas of dense vegetation - that hide and protect their nests from predators (Carrion crows, Magpies, Jays, foxes, dogs). *These areas tend to be good for biodiversity*

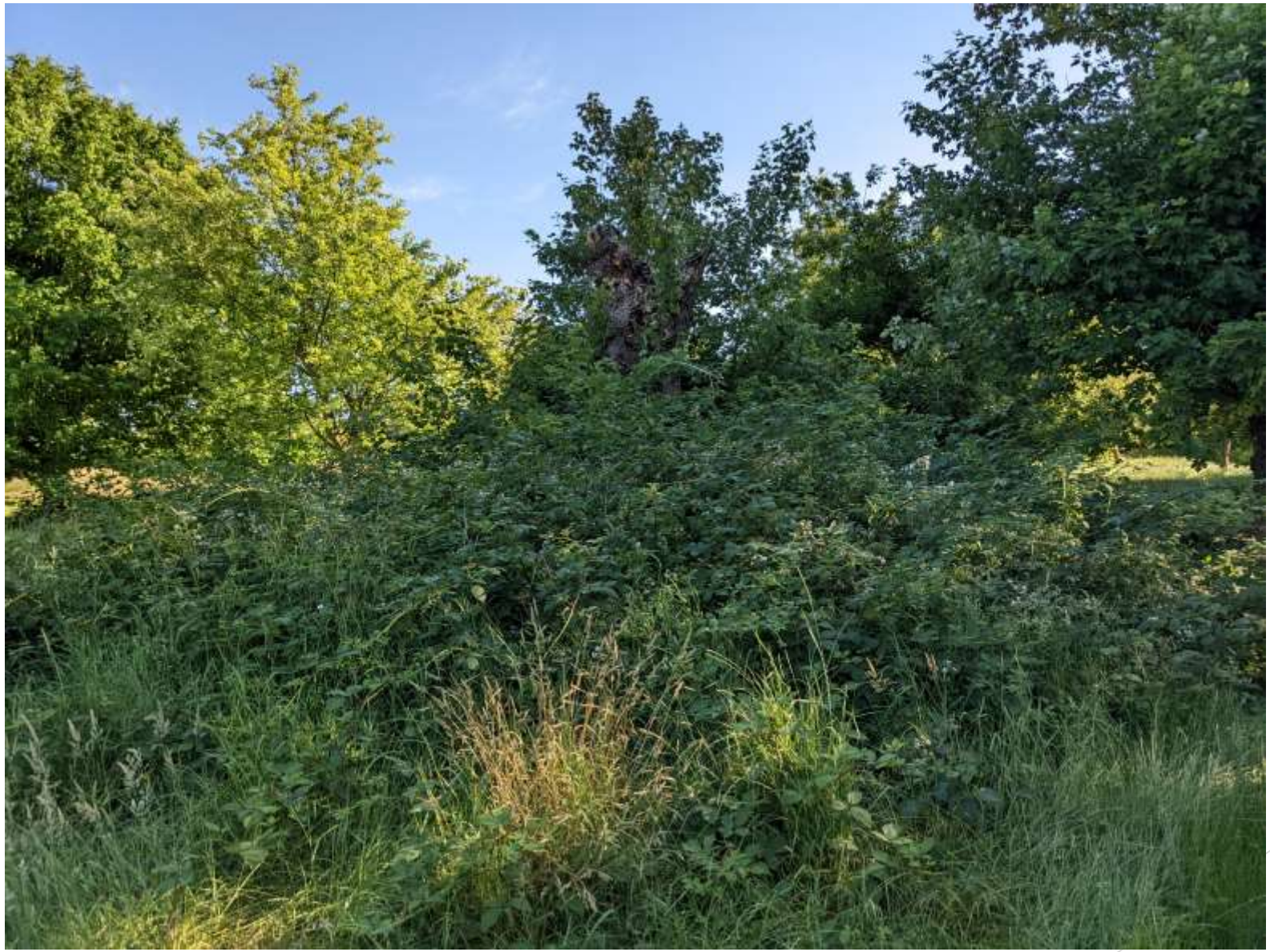
Low vegetation (long grass, nettles, brambles)

- Blackcap
- Chiffchaff
- Dunnock
- Robin
- Whitethroat
- Wren

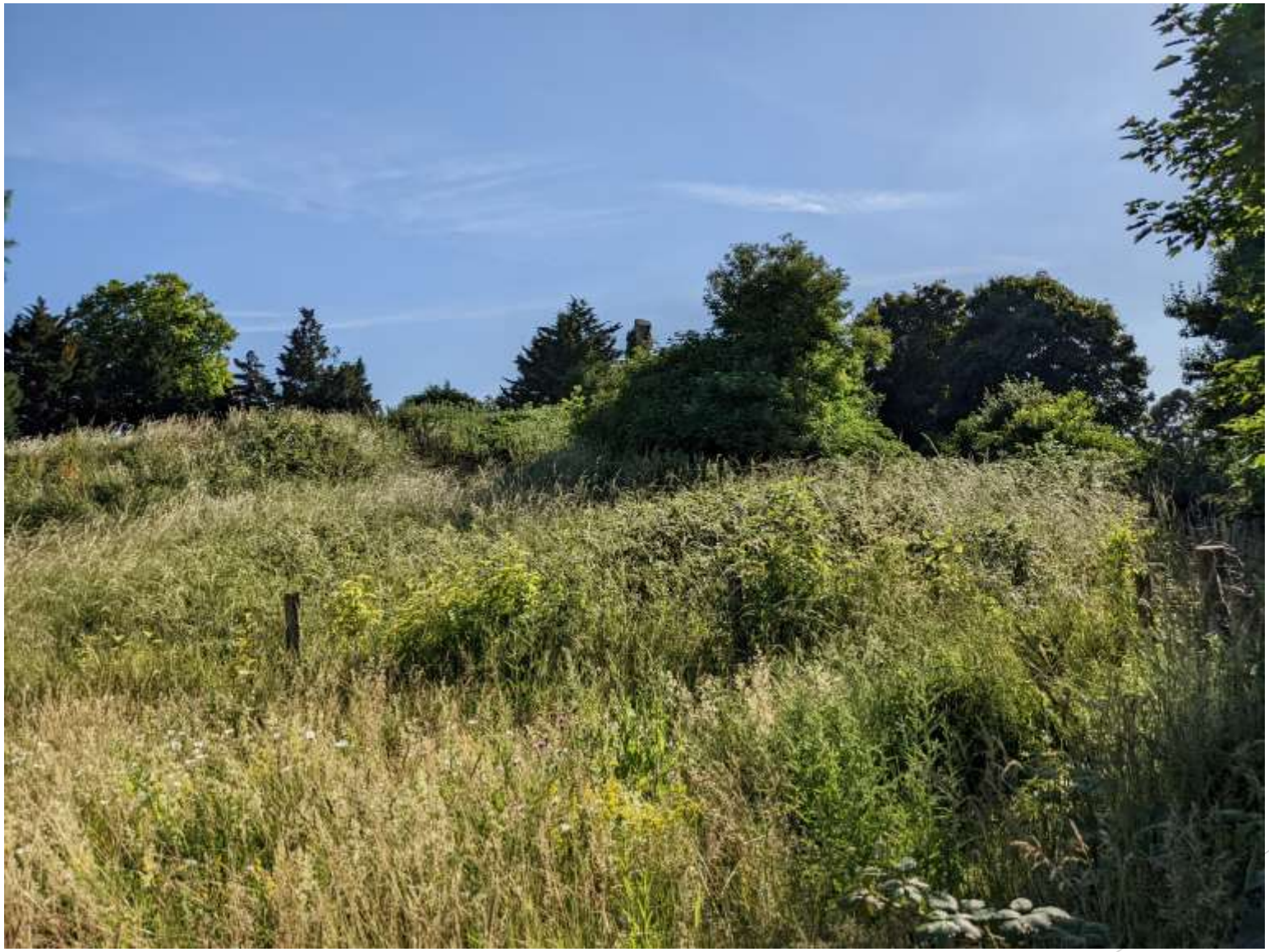
Bushes and Shrubs

- Blackbird
- Goldfinch
- Greenfinch
- Song thrush

Low-maintenance scrub where the Chiffchaffs nest



Low-maintenance scrub where the Whitethroats nest



FUTURE

It is widely recognised internationally, nationally (e.g. by the UK government) and locally that halting the loss of biodiversity is not enough – we also need to reverse the trends and restore some of the biodiversity that has been lost.

At the Lambeth level the council has made “a commitment to not only protect the wildlife – the habitats and species of wild plant and animal – that we currently have in Lambeth’s parks and open spaces, but also improve the extent, quality and diversity of this wildlife” (p. 42, Lambeth Biodiversity Action Plan 2019-2024).

What would this look like for Brockwell Park?

Conserving *and Enhancing* Brockwell Park's Biodiversity – **ACTIONS**

The council and voluntary organisations need to:

- **create more high biodiversity habitat and shelter** (managed and unmanaged)

- **increase the quantity and quality of foods for wild animals** by planting a variety of mainly native plants and trees that produce, for example:

1. seeds and fruits (e.g. haws, rosehips and sloes) for birds; and
2. pollen and nectar for insects

- take steps to counteract the effects of climate change (e.g. higher temperatures), such as water conservation measures (ponds, ditches)

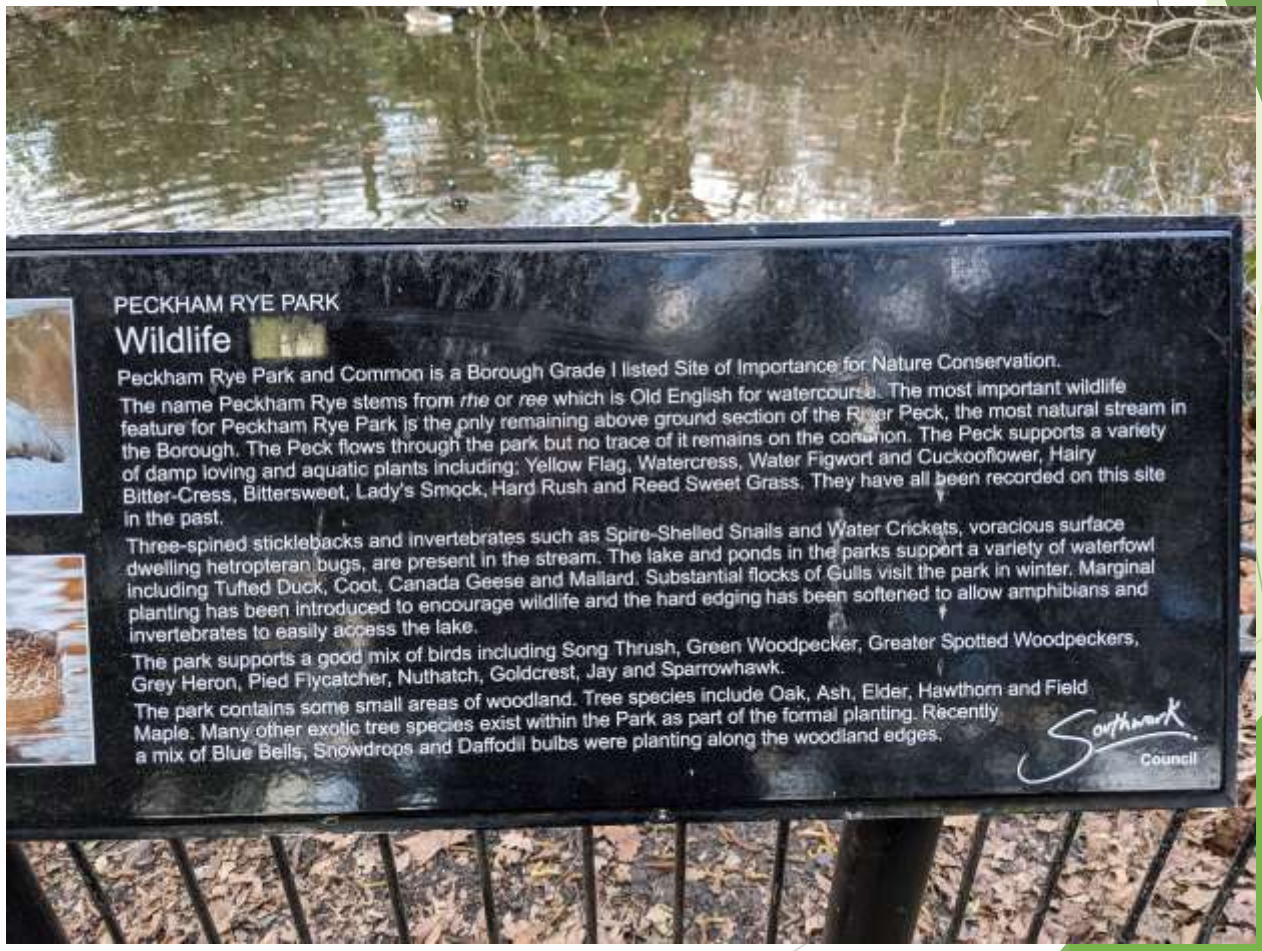
- **create more spaces where there is peace and quiet**, where disturbance from people and dogs is minimised

Creating and Sustaining Wildflower Meadows

- The existing wildflower meadow has been fenced off since it was created in 2019, in order to help it develop and become established. The council sees this fencing as a temporary measure that will be removed after it has been in place for five years (i.e. 2024). The council has a general policy of minimising the presence of any fencing in the park.
- When the fence is removed people will be free to wander around the area, play football, walk their dogs there, and use it for picnics if they wish. It will cease to be a quiet, protective haven for birds; and intensive use of the area by people and their dogs can be expected to reduce the biodiversity of the plants and insects present.
- The same thing is likely to happen to any new wildflower meadows that the council creates, if it follows the policy of only having temporary fencing.

Raising Public Awareness of Brockwell Park's Biodiversity

- Park users need to be aware of the importance of the park's biodiversity if they are to value it and help to preserve it.
- Brockwell Park is a *Site of Importance for Nature Conservation*. But how many park users know this? There are no signs in the park informing people of the park's status. This photo of one in Peckham Rye Park is an example of what is needed. All the park's notice boards should mention it too.
- Similarly, biodiversity hotspots within the park (such as wildflower meadows) should contain educational boards describing key species found there.

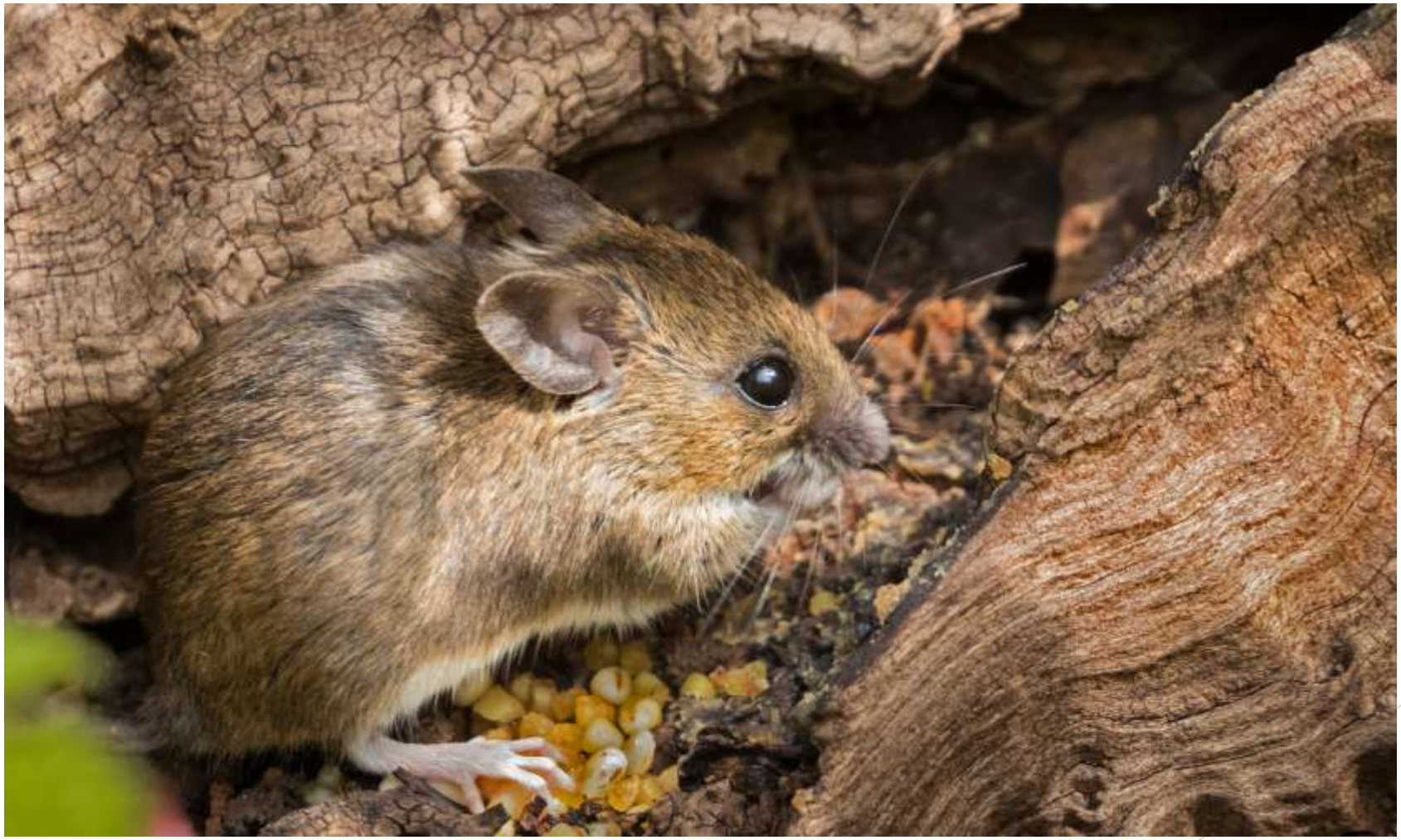


VISION OF A MORE BIODIVERSE BROCKWELL PARK

THERE WOULD BE:

- An abundance of butterflies and other insects, and the wild flowers they depend on
- More small mammals
- A thriving population of Hedgehogs
- Return and increased numbers of Kestrels, Swifts and other birds

More SMALL MAMMALS (mice, voles, shrews) – like this Wood mouse



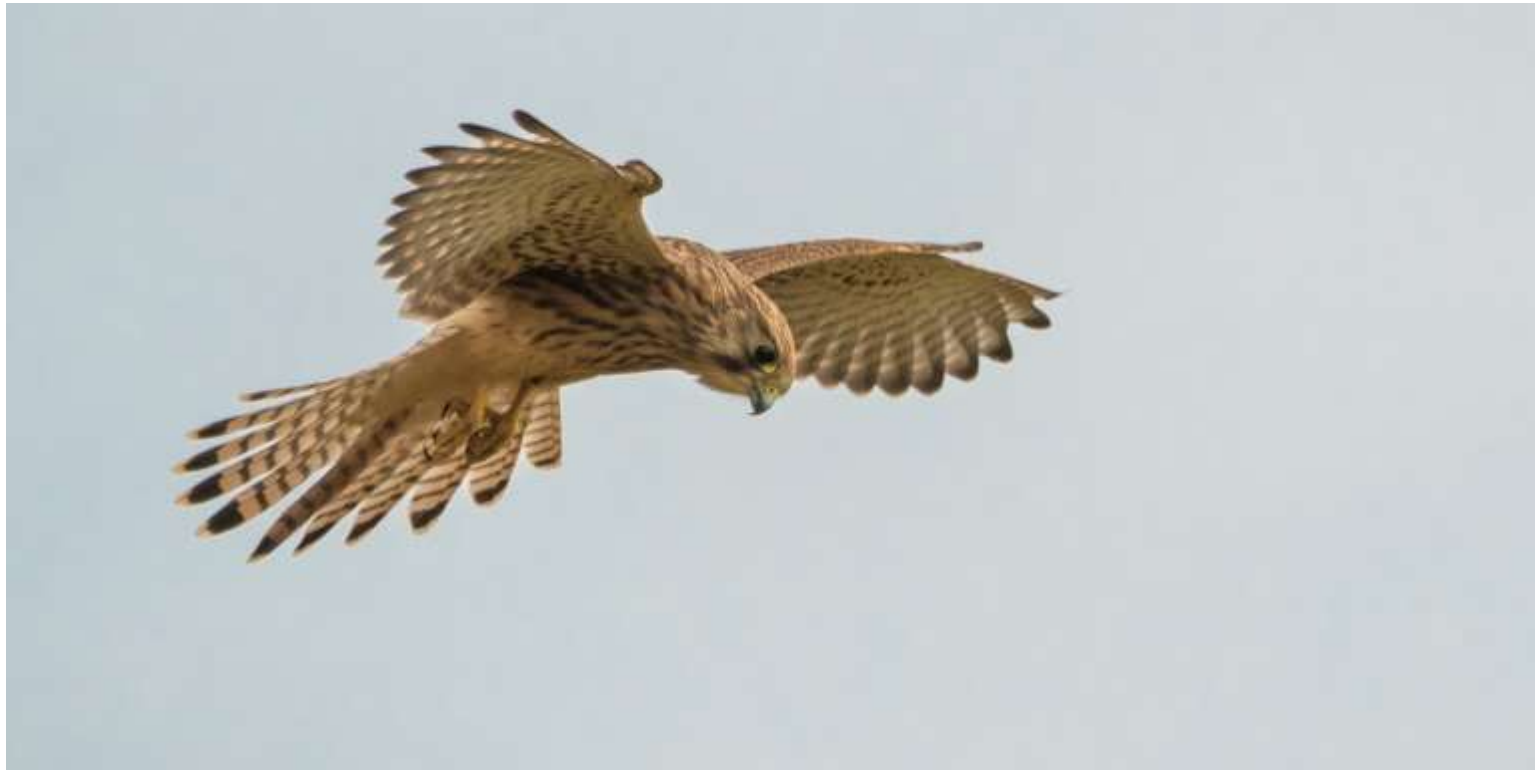
HEDGEHOGS

Return of a sustainable population of hedgehogs in the park and surrounding gardens

This isn't a pipedream, because

- there is a population of hedgehogs at the Rosendale allotments, not very far from the park.
- There are occasional sightings of hedgehogs in gardens on the south side of the park.
- A hedgehog dropping was found in the park's walled garden in the summer of 2022, so there must have been at least one in the park – but several females and at least one male are needed.

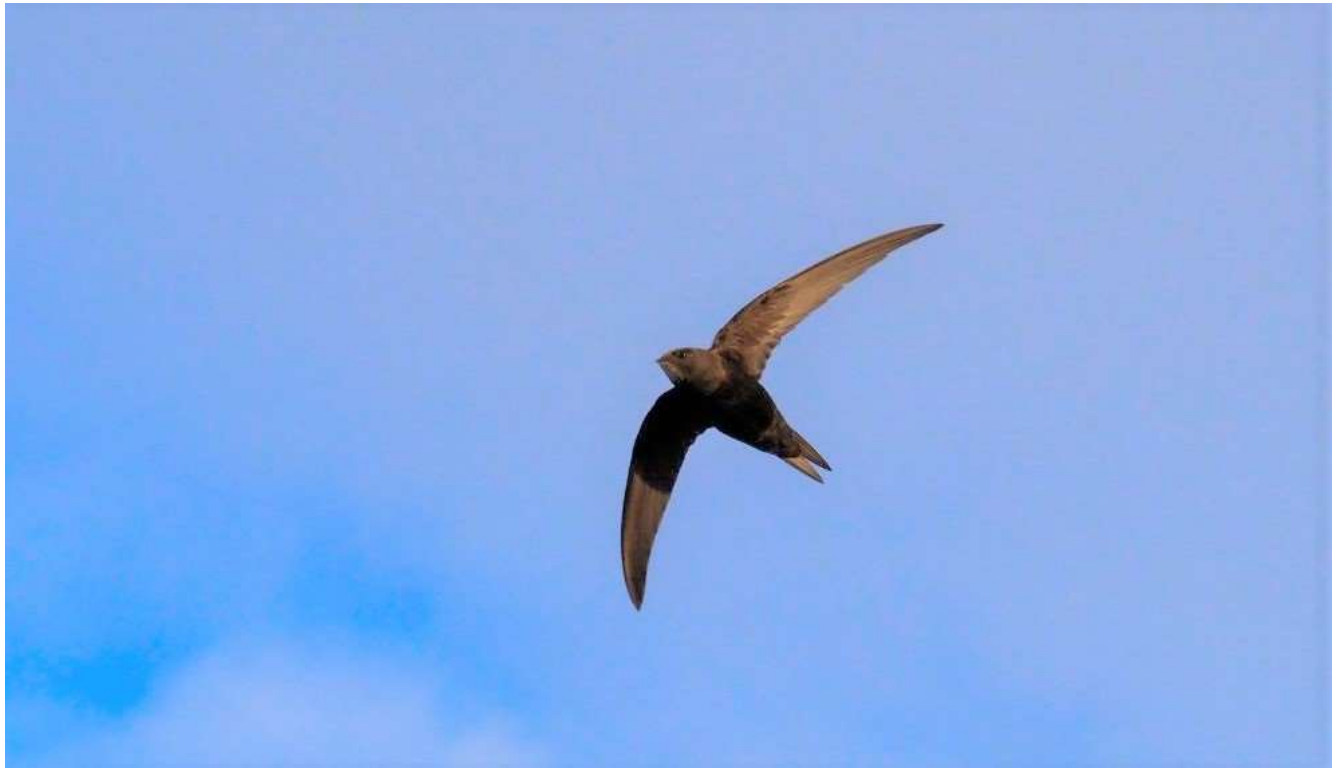
A sustainable population of hedgehogs might require a larger area of biodiverse habitat (hedgerows, wildflower meadows and other areas with plenty of slugs, caterpillars, beetles etc) in the park than there is currently. Neighbouring gardens can also provide relevant habitat and food, but the hedgehogs would need to be able to cross from one garden to another and from the park into the gardens (and vice versa).



KESTRELS feed mainly on small mammals, and also insects and small birds. They mainly hunt by hovering, before dropping down and pouncing on their prey on the ground. An increase in the park's managed and undisturbed open areas with high biodiversity would increase the numbers of small mammals and insects, and might attract Kestrels to the park to feed.

SWIFTS A major reason for the decline in swift numbers in Lambeth and elsewhere in London has been a reduction in the availability of nesting spaces in buildings. Swift nest boxes or bricks can be incorporated in buildings within and near to the park to compensate for this.

Photo: © Jon Perry



Notes

- Note 1. *The State of the UK's Birds 2020*, December 2020. Published by RSPB, BTO and others. https://www.bto.org/our-science/publications/state-uks-birds/state-uks-birds-2020
- Note 2. "Uncontrolled off-lead activity can cause problems of disturbance to species, particularly ground nesting birds and reptiles" (K. Priestman, 2017 – full reference in 3 below). For example, a recent study of Hampstead Heath's wooded areas found that birds were displaced away from some areas at times when high numbers of people and dogs were present. "The Impacts of Humans and Dogs on The Spatial and Temporal Activity of Wildlife In Urban Woodlands" by R.M.Beasley, C. Carbone, A. Brooker and J.Waage, 2022.
- Note 3. "Managing dogs and nature conservation", *Inside Ecology*, by K. Priestman, 2017. https://insideecology.com/2017/12/04/managing-dogs-and-nature-conservation/
- Note 4. According to the above reference (Priestman, 2017), "soils enriched with dog faeces encourage the growth of coarser plants such as nettles and thistles, which compete with and outgrow many wildflowers". Another study concluded that dogs' nitrogen and phosphorus "fertilization rates in peri-urban forests and nature are substantial ..[and] may considerably influence biodiversity and ecosystem functioning". "Nutrient Fertilization by Dogs in Peri-urban Ecosystems" by P. de Frenne and others, *Ecological Solutions and Evidence*, 2021.
- Note 5. A recent review of the literature concluded that "anthropogenic noise … is potentially a threat to the persistence of many species". "Evidence of the impact of noise pollution on biodiversity: a systematic map", R. Sordello and others, *Environmental Evidence*, 2020. Regarding birds specifically, there is evidence of them avoiding areas with loud noises (e.g. from gas well compressors), and of noise affecting reproductive success: "Effects of noise pollution on birds: A brief review of our knowledge", Chapter 2 in *Ornithological Monographs*, by C. Ortega, Vol 74, July 2012.